

## Truth, beauty and authenticity in folk music

*Ingrid Hamberg*

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Ón gCos go Cluas

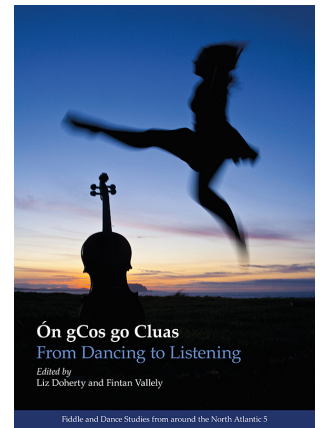
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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## Truth, beauty, and authenticity in folk music

INGRID HAMBERG

The meeting between dance and music is a meeting of people: a social event. In addition to the direct act of dancing, there are countless other forms of connection at a social dance. The fiddler provides both a foreground and a background in this tapestry, both masking and organizing chaos in the gathering. While the specifics of a tradition's music and dance vary over time, I argue that there are certain meaningful constants, embodied by the community, that bind the music to the dance, which cannot be replaced by recorded music. This article is largely based on my experiences and observations over some twenty-five years, primarily in Seattle, WA, USA, but also in Rauland, Norway. I have experienced the folk dance and music community both as an integral member and leader, and as a guest. I have been an insider and an outsider, a dancer, a musician, a student and a teacher. Here, I focus on this community and the individuals that compose it. I discuss some of the players and sites of these interactions – and their interdependences. I suggest that folk dance and music communities need not seek to fit into the aesthetics of other genres, but should engage in a discussion defining folk-aesthetics. I argue that a determination of truth, beauty, and authenticity can only be made from within the community that is producing a given folk expression.

### **The community**

A modern folk dance and music community can be defined as a group of individuals who have chosen to be involved in the activities associated with playing traditional music and dancing. For some born into the community they are interested because it is what they know; they may choose to not seek out another community, or they may choose to return to their folk dance and music community. Others make a definite choice to take part in a community in which they have no family history or have had no previous personal connection. Regardless of the method of entry, however, all members choose to take part by choice despite, or in tandem, with countless other opportunities. Within the community the individuals find themselves filling many different roles, primary among which are the defining roles of musician and dancer. In addition, there are those who take on administrative and logistical roles, such as documentation, recruitment, and education. The duties of each are clear, and though one individual may function in multiple roles, it is nevertheless important that someone is

doing these jobs. The community also has its elders who may or may not be willing or able to dance or play anymore, but who actively participate by watching, listening to, approving (or not) what they see and hear, and articulating the history of the group. I will focus on the dancers and musicians because they have the primary function in these communities.

The musicians' role is to provide the music for dancing. They must be able to predict what kind of dance tunes will be appealing for the dancers, be capable of playing these tunes, and be flexible enough to choose other tunes on demand or when they notice waning interest from the dancers. Musicians put hours and years of training into learning to play their instrument and developing repertoire, but just as important is the ability to communicate with the others present at the event. Their music must be precise in rhythm and tempo; it should drive and inspire the dancers to move. In the USA, it is common for musicians to post dance lists or 'call' the types of dances, since they are catering to an audience with an appetite for variety. The lists make it clear what kind of music is being played so the dancers know what to expect. As the focal point of the action, the musicians guide not only the dancing, but also are the source of all general announcements (regarding upcoming events, important information, etc.) during the evening. A good musician is an excellent artist, has an understanding of what the dancers need and is alert to what is happening all around.

The role of the dancer is to dance to the music provided by the musician. The dancers carry in their bodies the other half of this picture, which is unfinished until both musicians and dancers are working together. An experienced dancer is flexible to different musicians' styles, but also has preferences that they express while dancing (or through choosing not to dance). They listen to the music and dance according to their own physical abilities and limitations, telling the musician if the tempo or rhythm are right or wrong either verbally or through their presence on or absence from the dance floor. As this is a social event, the dancers are very often found doing something other than dancing, such as standing or sitting talking with the other dancers and attendees, listening with half an ear so as not to miss the start of the next set or tune. When dancing they may also be talking to their partner, and yet somehow, they are still listening to the music, dancing, along with all the other couples on the floor, to the music provided by the musician. This ability to seemingly not pay attention and yet be in synch is also the result of years of practice – both listening to the music and dancing the steps.

Unlike a traditional society, where everyone takes part in the same rituals, celebrations, and daily life, the modern folk music and dance community is comprised of individuals who choose to dedicate more or less significant portions of their life to this particular sub-culture. The people they interact with on a daily basis at work, school, even at home are more likely than not to be uninvolved in the folk music and dance community. The community gives them something that they do not get from the mainstream society, such as friends with similar interests, a connection to the past, a feeling of security, or an opportunity to excel at a particular skill. I suggest that these communities provide the same framework for social interaction as a traditional community by filling in the gaps and absences (that is, a sense of isolation or rootlessness) that modern individuals may experience in the course of a typical urban life.

### **Individuals make the society**

The ritual of social folk dancing in the modern world has a prescribed set of actions that are followed by participants during an event. These vary from one subset of the community to another, but they share general characteristics that bind them together. The actions of individuals, and of music organisations, contribute to the development and evolution of the cultural expressions of the community. Before a social event can take place the organisation must have a location, which, in the case of regularly scheduled events, will be somewhere that is suitable for the activity, is affordable, and encourages people to come back time after time. The organisation might consider how the floor works for dancing, if it is possible to amplify the musicians, whether the room is well ventilated, the availability of kitchen facilities, if it is in a safe neighbourhood, and if there is parking available or convenient public transport. Depending on the goals of each community, these – and other – considerations are prioritised differently. Before each event, designated members of the community perform a number of logistical tasks. Someone makes sure that there are fiddlers available, takes care of advertising, and provides a cash box and cashier. Someone checks that the building or room will be unlocked, heated/cooled properly, cleared for dancing and ready for playing. If food is a part of the standard routine, then snacks are arranged or a meal is prepared; community members are called on to take part in everything from making the food to cleaning afterward.

As the community arrives at the hall for the event, they make a symbolic break with the outside world by changing shoes and preparing to dance or play. They greet one another and pay any entrance fees. They open instrument cases and tune their instruments. They set aside their daily lives and enter a world of folk music and dance. The musicians begin to play and the dancers begin to dance. Simultaneously, people stand or sit and catch up on the latest news. Some dancers chat while they move to the music; others lose themselves entirely in the sounds of the music and the movements shared with their partner. The individuals in the community dance, play, and interact according to specific unwritten rules that govern their actions and allow them to enter a sort of creative trance. These rules or expectations grow from the core of the community and its members' assumptions about how certain tunes should be played and which dances danced. Outsiders to the community, even those from similar communities in other places, will likely have different expectations; these differences define the borders between groups that otherwise seem similar to the outside observer.

### **Music and dance: parts of a whole**

I look at folk music and folk dance as complementary parts of a whole. Both are equally important in the determination of the characteristics of the other. The music and dance develop simultaneously in response to new impulses and changing circumstances in the community. Historically, smoother floors and bigger rooms allowed for dancers to move around the floor, creating a demand for louder instruments or more fiddles. An ageing population remembers that a certain dance was always done slower, allowing them to enjoy it for longer; a young fiddler wants to play faster or slower and the dancers accommodate her. In an attempt to separate one group from another, small differences in playing style and

dance are underscored and enlarged. In all of these examples the fiddlers and dancers are constantly adapting to one another. It is this synergistic interplay that makes them feel like they belong to a community and gives the members of the community control over their outward expression.

Separating music and dance from one another gives each the freedom to develop separately, resulting in music that is great for a listening audience or for specialist dancers, but often not suitable for social dancing. This separation is also a reaction to a modern change in taste; people who want to take part in the folk dance and music community as observers are able to listen to concerts and watch dance performances, while the musicians and dancers have arguably greater artistic freedom. I believe all of these types of expression and experience can be beautiful, authentic experiences, but that they are different types of experience. Playing folk music for a concert audience is not the same as playing for dancers, just as performing folk dances on a stage is not the same as dancing them socially. Playing a concert, regardless of the size of the audience, allows the musician much greater flexibility. They are free to choose tunes defined as 'listening tunes' (that can't be danced to), or they may alter the tempo and rhythm of dance tunes in ways that highlight their personal virtuosity, but clashes with the dancers' abilities. Such musicians can arrange the tunes however they feel in the concert setting. Dance musicians, as such, are also quite free, but whatever they play must be danceable. In Nordic folk dance, 'danceable' implies that there will be no major variations in tempo and there is an adherence to the rhythm of the dance. Tunes can be 'arranged', but only so long as the dancers are able to identify with the underlying dance groove.

Stage performances of folk dance vary from more or less rehearsed presentations of specific dances to highly technical choreographed theatrical representations. This is in contrast to the social dancing at various skills levels as described above. In a social-dance setting, the degree to which each dancer is listening to the music varies, but they will all be very responsive to sudden, disruptive changes. For example, unexpected changes in tempo or time signature (from a polka to a polska without pause) will get the dancers' attention as they are jostled out of their groove; jumps in volume and key changes mid-tune may interest the dancers and cause them to listen more closely, but will not disturb the overall flow of the dance. This is because in a given situation they know what to expect from the musicians, and while musical finesse is appreciated, the most important skill from the point of view of the dancing public, is the ability to provide a solid foundation for the dance. Social dancers are dancing for the sheer joy of dancing, and perhaps also for the exercise the movement provides, and for the social contact.

Stage-performing dancers are communicating, too, with the audience. What they choose to communicate in their performance dictates how they will stage and choreograph the dance. The dancers rehearse and communicate directly with the musicians to explain exactly what they want or need in the music. They may even have music composed for a specific performance. The social dancer, on the other hand, relies on their knowledge of the concepts of the music and dance to physically interpret whatever the musician plays.

For me, the difference between these examples lies in the audience. In the case of a staged performance, the dancers have an indirect contact with the audience. Whereas at a

social dance, when the audience consists of the other participating community members, the dancers are touching each other as they dance, adapting to the music, the movements of their partner, and other couples on the floor. It is this community and contact that keeps the changes slow and consensus-based. For the dances on stage to be considered folk dance, they must be accepted by the folk dance community, something that can be confirmed in that community's discourse. When the community accepts the dancers on stage as members of the community they also welcome any new variations in the dance as a legitimate part of its repertoire. In this way, the performing dancers are able to assert a great influence over the otherwise slowly-evolving folk-dance community.

### **Truth**

As it relates to the world of folk music and dance, this word is often used interchangeably with 'authenticity', and 'true' is also used synonymously with 'right' or 'correct'. The truth is presented as an objective fact and is often referred to in order to claim legitimacy for a certain way of performing. In Scandinavian folk music, claims of historical truth are conflated with authenticity to raise the status of a performance or performer. Without a time machine, there is little that we can do to find out exactly how things sounded or looked in the past. Even with the earliest of recordings, we are usually left with an incomplete picture that lacks context and insight into the minds of those recorded. The best we can do is imitate and reconstruct them as far as possible and, based on our own experience, draw conclusions about how and why they did things the way we perceive them.

When we learn directly from a master fiddler or dancer we are getting direct input from an accepted member of the community that shapes how we continue playing or dancing. Watching dances on a film or learning tunes from a recording is a useful and valuable tool, but it cannot compare to playing for dancers who will stop and correct the playing tempo, or to working out how to fit a certain rhythm to the moves of the dance in response to the movements of a partner's body. In this way, individual experiences are shared from dancer to dancer to musician and back to the dancers, equalising in a fleeting collective truth. Separating the music and the dance takes away the possibility for this type of collective truth, even though it does create new opportunities. When we dance to recorded music, it is the recording that represents the truth in its unwavering repetition. How we then move to that recorded music is determined by its rigidity or flexibility, and either frees our movements as compensation or fixes them into a pattern to match the recording. Dancers or musicians on stage are free to communicate directly with the audience, representing their version of the truth.

### **Beauty**

This is a concept that refers to pleasurable experience. For some, beauty is viewed purely as form, while others, in evaluating beauty, take into account the artist's pleasure in creating the art (or music or dance). Folk music and dance derive their sense of beauty from the interest the individuals of a community have in these expressions. In the past the aesthetic beauty was linked to ethical goodness; but music that tells a morally good story is not necessarily what a modern listener would consider aesthetically beautiful. Folk music, on the other

hand, when played in the older style was considered beautiful if it helped the listeners to have a good experience or reminded them of an epic story.<sup>1</sup> Today, the folk dance and music that is practiced and preserved is that which a modern folk dance and music community considers beautiful and pleasing. In our modern society where these communities are made up of individuals from different backgrounds, we have to consider the effect of both personal tastes and exposure to many other musics.

Prior to the arrival of tempered-scale instruments, records, and radio in rural Norway, traditional musicians, dancers, and listeners had minimal outside reference to determine what 'should be' considered beautiful. While they clearly had contact with the rest of the world, they had their own understanding of how ideally to form the intervals on their most common instruments (fiddle and voice). While there are several theories about how Norwegians in the eighteenth century came to this understanding of tonality,<sup>2</sup> it is clear that they found it to be beautiful (or they would have played in some other way). Ethnologists and music researchers during Norway's national romantic period assumed that rural musicians played 'out of tune' because they didn't know any better or lacked technique. But it is now widely accepted that these were often very talented musicians who were quite conscious of creating music they experienced as 'right'. This is because they found this music good and beautiful the way they played it. Today, folk music students have grown up on and internalised the tempered scale, and do not generally find the untempered intervals used in the past pleasing. So-called folk-music-theory is taught in relation to the chromatic pitches (the neutral third, a fluctuating seventh, etc.). From personal experience, I find that it can be difficult and confusing for students to try to reproduce the older scales that they do not understand and may not find pleasing. To understand such complex tonal nuances they must be internalised through listening, and studied both practically (by playing or singing) and empirically (by looking at the differences in frequencies using modern technology). Through an internalisation of this tonality, they may come to appreciate it and even find it beautiful. Alternatively, the argument can be made that today's folk music and dance community find the tunes played on a tempered scale beautiful, and therefore have no reason to study the older tonality.

The question of beauty is also relevant for the dancers. Why a given dance has taken the form it has depends on the community's interpretation of moving to the music in a way that is collectively pleasing. The kinds of movements depend on the dancer's age, motives, and familiarity with the dance and of course the music. A young man showing off will often use bigger, more powerful movements, even when the music is relatively laid-back. An older woman may seem more spritely when dancing to up-beat tunes and is light on her feet, even though she is exerting little energy. The critical factor in both of these examples is the pleasing effect (for the dancers, the musicians, and anyone watching) of the human body moving in time to the music and not the specific moves each dancer is making. However, a folk dance community imposes rules on these movements based on their tradition, and it is most beautiful when all movements are similar or symmetrical and everyone is dancing together. In recent years, Scandinavian folk dancers have moved to the stage. They have taken with them elements of traditional dances and music. The dancers choreograph dances and scenes. They tell stories with their dances in a way that is modern and theatrical. This



is a new ideal, much as concert performing was new for folk musicians in the national romantic period. Still, their goal is to produce dances that will give pleasure to the audience and be perceived as beautiful.

### **Authenticity [weisethaunet]: ‘real’ versus ‘true’**

Authenticity poses a problem because it is in great demand, and there are many different interpretations of the word. The designation ‘authentic’ can be used to indicate historic authenticity (older is better), organic or embodied (collective) authenticity, and personal (individual) authenticity.<sup>3</sup> Allan Moore suggests that in any performance there is a possibility for first, second, and third person authenticity depending on who is perceiving the performance and how it gives or represents a real experience.<sup>4</sup> How can we know if folk music and/or dance are authentic and what kind of authenticity we are dealing with? Stan Godlovitch offers a solution to what is often a complicated problem. By viewing all action as the individual’s performance of their identity and authenticity as the experience of this performance, he suggests that authenticity is not only possible but also achievable.<sup>5</sup> Returning to our folk dance and music communities, the question of authenticity then becomes a question of who is performing and what actions are being defined as authentic. Here I suggest that the answer varies. Authenticity is a desired feature in a performance for the audience, just as it is a desired feature for the performer and the social musician/dancer. That is, authenticity is defined in relation to the individual or group having the experience, as only they can know if they felt something in the moment of experience. Regardless of what they play, the musicians and dancers on stage are usually having a meaningful experience that they are sharing with the audience (which is also having an authentic experience). Social dancers’ and musicians’ experiences, while different from those in the first group, are equally real and meaningful.

For the folk dance and music community to recognise authenticity, the individuals must collectively agree that a given experience or type of performance is authentic. Simply, it is the community that decides what is folk music and what is folk dance. However, a community is built of individuals and their consensus on what is and is not folk music or dance is near impossible to reach. It is in this spoken and unspoken negotiation regarding what is and is not authentic, that the evolution of the tradition occurs, slowly and with the approval of the community. Those who break the rules are either excluded, verifying the rules, or included, expanding the rules. Norwegian art historian, Harry Fett, divides folk art into three groups or types – the archaic, the style-connecting, and the style-breaking.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that these three categories can be similarly applied to folk music and dance.

Folk music students ask themselves constantly ‘what is folk music?’ and ‘is this folk music?’ This is their way of engaging in the authenticity discourse; some typical examples will illustrate this point; it is easy to begin with mostly-contemporary groups of young musicians. Valkyrien Allstars is a band made up of three Hardanger fiddle players accompanied by bass and drums. While they define themselves as ‘renewing folk music’, the folk music community is generally uncertain about whether or not what they play actually is folk music. They are very clearly breaking rules and it remains to be seen if their music is considered ‘style connecting’ or ‘style breaking’ in the future. The five-member band



Sver is considered to be one of the greatest contemporary folk groups in Scandinavia, implying that they have successfully stretched the boundaries of the authentic definition of folk music. Nils Økland is a well-respected Hardanger fiddle player within the folk music community; however, his compositions are generally classified as ‘contemporary classical’, not ‘folk’ – whether playing traditional tunes or his own contemporary compositions, Økland’s expressions are, however, authentic for him and have the potential to be accepted as authentic by the folk music community. There are numerous examples of the ‘archaic’ group which is represented by solo fiddlers and singers, and by community social dancing to live music, each of which differs from place to place.

In a social setting, the question of authenticity usually relates to how we perform the music and dances. Some aim to copy their instructors exactly, to embody a historical authenticity. Others internalise the music and the dances and express them as their own creative expressions. This is the kind of experienced authenticity that I am promoting. As I see it, authenticity comes from the feeling of understanding both the music and the dance and playing or dancing to the best of your ability. I recently took a dance workshop where the instructor, Olav Sem, told us to watch each dance carefully because ‘you’ll never see it again’. This was interpreted as somewhat morbid by the other participants when directed at the dance of an old man dancing with his good friend; one of them hunched over and barely able to stand upright, the other a rather large fellow. But when they began to dance they were both elegant and joyful, clearly having an authentic and beautiful experience that was also accepted by the community that paused in their dancing to watch.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

I have discussed the idea that folk music and dance are two equal parts of a whole that, when separated in modern times, give way to three things: a) the original whole, b) the music, and c) the dance. Each of these allow for artistic expression and can be considered a part of the folk music and dance community, if they are embraced and approved by that community. The community defines their truth based on their collective taste and experience. I suggest that any discussion of truth, beauty, or authenticity as it relates to folk dance and music must come from within the experience of the community. Applying external aesthetical principles implies that folk music and dance are objects that can be analysed out of context – as pure objects; I submit that the only relevant analysis must come from within the community and that the aesthetic values of a folk music and dance community are subject to the values and experiences of its individual members. Folk music and dance are essentially expressive interactions between people. Focusing only on the external properties and comparing them to other forms of expression is useful only if the primary goal is to draw boundaries. Music and dance bring people together as I think the study of music and dance should also do.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Vidar Lande, *Lies0tøltradisjonen i Setesdal: musikkrepertoaret etter Tomas og Gunnar Larson Liestøl* (Rauland: Høgskolen i Telemark, Institutt for folkekultur, 1 plate [CD] i lomme, 2007).

## Ón gCos go Cluas – From Dancing to Listening

- <sup>2</sup> Reidar Sevåg, 'Toneartspørsmålet i Norsk Folkemusikk', in *Fanitullen: innføring i Norsk og Samisk Folkemusikk*, ed. by Bjørn Aksdal and Sven Nyhus (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> Margunn Bjørnholt, 'Kilder til begjær, inderlighet til besvær? Om tradisjon, fornyelse og faglig refleksjon i folkedansen', *Musikk og tradisjon* (2011), p. 25.
- <sup>4</sup> Allan Moore, 'Authenticity as Authentication', *Popular Music*, 21, no. 2 (2002), 209–223.
- <sup>5</sup> Stan Godlovitch, 'Performance Authenticity: Possible, Practical, Virtuous', in *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts*, ed. by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 22.
- <sup>6</sup> Mikkel B. Tin, 'Abstraksjon i folkekunsten', *Kunst og kultur*. 86, no. 4 (2003), 240–258.
- <sup>7</sup> Springdans NW, *Springdans* (Seattle, WA: Skandia Folkdance Society, 2012).